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Factors motivating destination decisions of Chinese study abroad students

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Abstract

Purpose- The paper examines the effects of individual differences on the key motivational factors affecting Chinese study abroad students.

Design/methodology/approach- The current study adopts a quantitative survey approach. Students are recruited through the largest online survey provider in China. Using 335 completed questionnaires and factor analysis, the key factors influencing Chinese students are identified. Subsequently, regressions are employed to analyse the impact of age, gender, socio-economic status, previous study or travel abroad experience, degree level and location on factor scores.

Findings- This research sheds new light on the decision making process of Chinese study abroad students. It is found that Chinese students are influenced by three key factors, social, cultural and economic environment, non-personal and personal recommendations. The results reveal that male students from the lowest socio-economic group rely on non-personal

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information to decide destination where they can significantly upgrade their socio-economic status. Personal recommendations are used by young persons aged between 18 and 24 and those without previous overseas travel or study experience.

Originality/value- Although prior studies explore the motivations of Chinese study abroad students, very few focus on a large sample of students both in China and abroad and identify key factors using the statistical tool factor analysis. No research has been carried out to understand the impact of personal characteristics such as age, gender, prior study or travel abroad experience, degree level and location on significant factor scores. Such analysis is crucial for the financial stability of the international higher education market, particularly during the current Covid-19 crisis.

Keywords: study abroad, Chinese students, factor analysis, socio-economic status; age; gender

Paper type- Research paper

Introduction

Covid-19 has forced universities around the world to change teaching delivery from face-to-face to 100 percent online (Altbach & De Wit, 2020). This change will indisputably affect the study abroad decision making process of the world's largest international student body, Chinese students (OECD, 2017, 2018, 2019) as well as the financial stability of higher education in English speaking countries such as the UK and Australia, which heavily depend on the tuition fees of Chinese students (Dolton, 2020; Kanishka, 2020; Marginson, 2008). It begs a question: will social, cultural and economic constraints shaped by Covid-19 reduce the number of Chinese study abroad students? To answer this question, it is necessary to revisit the underlying motivations of Chinese study abroad students so as to provide empirical guidance to policy makers in universities and governments around the world during and following the Covid-19 crisis.

The motivations of Chinese study abroad students have been adequately investigated through the traditional pull and push model in prior studies (Bodycott, 2009; L-H. Chen, 2007; Cheung, Guo, Wang, & Miao, 2019; Cheung & Xu, 2015; Cheung & Yuen, 2016; Dimmock & Leong, 2010; Gao & Trent, 2009; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; To, Lung, Lai, & Lai, 2014; M. Yang, 2007). Multidimensional reasons have been identified, ranging from individual differences such as socioeconomic background, gender and academic aspirations, significant persons such as family members, friends and professors, to various pull and push characteristics such as academic reputation, safety, multicultural and societal environments, economic reasons such as employment opportunities in both host and home countries. However, to the best of our knowledge, the effects of combined individual differences of Chinese students on the most influential factors in the decision making process of Chinese students are not explored in the literature, and this motivates the current study. This literature gap is particularly relevant for policy makers in the current global higher education market. Universities around the world will need to rethink their marketing and branding strategies in order to maintain and strengthen their attraction to Chinese students during the pandemic. It is argued that institutions can best compete for international students if they understand significant study abroad factors among different groups of students (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

This research is based on the completed questionnaires of 335 Chinese students both in China and abroad at the time of survey to minimise specific cohort, university and host country biases. The hierarchy of significant factors in the survey are extracted, identified, and classified using factor analysis, similar to prior studies (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Cheung et al., 2019), with additional regression analysis to control the influences of individual

differences on factors. Regressions on factor scores are not previously used in the study abroad literature to explicitly and simultaneously control the impact of age, gender, socio-economic status, degree level and prior study or travel abroad experiences.

Factors and individual differences -complexities and statistical approaches

Until recently (Cheung et al., 2019; To et al., 2014), the significance of pull and push factors inspiring Chinese study abroad students was simply determined by ranking the average Likert scale scores of survey questions from highest to lowest while the comparisons of averages among subgroups were conducted using independent two-sample t-tests. This statistical approach provides no consideration for correlations among personal, social, cultural, political, economic and academic reasons, interpersonal advice, information searching, country and institutional image (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Cubillo, Sánchez, & Cerviño, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Two exceptional papers in the Chinese study abroad literature employ factor analysis to reduce a number of survey questions to six or four key factors (Cheung et al., 2019; To et al., 2014). Factor analysis can condense a large number of correlated variables into a smaller set of, usually uncorrelated, factors which measure the same underlying dimensions explaining the maximum amount of shared information or common variances (Blunch, 2016; Field, 2005).

Cheung et al. (2019) uncover six academic, cultural and social, and economic factors motivating student flow from China to Hong Kong (shortened to HK thereafter). Their results are limited by a small sample size of 122 students and self-determined preference to HK as they have already taken up study in four HK universities at the time of survey. On the other hand, To *et al.* (2014) identify four factors consisting of 16 academic and social, geographical and economic reasons and personal information sources using 366 students from China,

Macau, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Both studies miss an opportunity to statistically examine the links between individual differences and significant factors, despite the key role played by students' characteristics such as socioeconomic status, age, gender, academic ability, motivation and aspirations in the decision making process for study abroad destinations such as Korea (Lee, 2017), Singapore (Dimmock & Leong, 2010), HK (Gao & Trent, 2009; Li & Bray, 2007; To et al., 2014) and Macau (Li & Bray, 2007).

The relationships between individual variables and significant factors should be statistically tested to clarify their influences, or else, the claimed importance of individual differences on study abroad destination choices of Chinese students is at best anecdotal evidence. In the international student decision making literature, a recent paper by Ahmad & Hussain (2017) is the first to use univariate and multivariate analyses of variance to investigate group differences between males and females, students of different nationality and socio-economic background, and students intending to study different types of subjects, on significant university image factors. Univariate analysis of variance identifies statistically significant differences in a dependent variable while multivariate analysis of variance examines two or more dependent variables between different groups (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Field, 2005; Mansfield, 2011). Both univariate and multivariate analyses of variance are suitable for examining different groups based on an independent variable such as gender but cannot take two or more independent variables at the same time. To simultaneously control the possible effects of many individual differences on significant factors, the current study will implement regression analysis.

The decision making process of Chinese students

In terms of Chinese students' international destination choices, the seminal work by Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) use five categories, namely, knowledge and awareness of the host country,

recommendations from friends and relatives, cost issues, social and learning environment, and social links and geographic proximity, to provide understanding of decisions made by international students in Australia. They show that the important pull factor for international, including Chinese students, is the excellent academic reputation of Australia and its institutions. Since then, the academic reputation of the host country and institutions has been found to be an overriding factor for Chinese students studying in Australia (M. Yang, 2007), Canada (L-H. Chen, 2007), HK (Cheung et al., 2019) and the US (Cheung & Xu, 2015).

These results sit at odds with each other as the global education market is dominated by American research intensive institutions, not Australian, Canadian or HK universities (Kim, 2011; Marginson, 2007, 2008). The mixed findings suggest the possibility of response bias by conducting survey and/or interview studies with students who are resident in a particular host destination so pre-programmed to believe in the high academic reputation of their decisions. For instance, some Chinese students in Canada at the time of interviews claim that they forwent scholarships offered by American universities for Canadian courses and professors due to their better research reputation (L-H. Chen, 2007). Their comments are not related to an absolute comparison of the academic reputation of two destinations but the global rankings of American and Canadian universities which give them an offer.

Although academic reputation is frequently featured as the most important reason for choosing a destination, evidence suggests that it can be relegated by Chinese students to the second or third place after financial, academic, social and cultural factors. Financial issues play a big part in decision making, depending on the economic capital possessed by the families of Chinese study abroad students. For instance, two studies carried out in the early 1990s reveal that some mainland Chinese students in the University of Memphis base their

choice on the amount of financial assistance offered rather than the academic reputation of the institution while those attending the University of Nebraska at Lincoln are attracted by relatively low admission costs and living expenses (Cheung & Xu, 2015).

Since the 2000s, the burgeoning growth of the Chinese wealthy upper and middle classes has exponentially increased the number of self-financing students (Li & Bray, 2007; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Still, many Chinese families are not fortunate enough to discard financial concerns related to study abroad. Since the 2000s, Chinese society consists of a massive low-income population and a tiny minority who possess disproportionately large amounts of wealth on the top and it has become impossible for ordinary Chinese citizens to enter the top echelon of society (Xiang & Shen, 2009). In a study by Li and Bray (2007), the top reason for Chinese students to choose HK is scholarship while the low living costs and tuition fees in Singapore, compared with the US and the UK, are the number one pull factor in the decision making process (Dimmock & Leong, 2010). Similarly, independent sample t-tests show that low living costs are far more important for low and middle class than upper class students (To et al., 2014).

Chinese students' decisions can also be strongly affected by poor academic ability. Using six interviews and 633 completed survey questionnaires, Chinese self-financing students are primarily attracted to South Korea by the low entry requirements of Korean institutions (Lee, 2017). Low academic ability leads to the difficulty in obtaining an offer from English speaking countries and institutions with superb academic reputations. Almost all 10 Chinese participants studying for an education programme in HK admit the lack of alternative academic options due to low entrance examination scores (M. Gu & Lai, 2012). Chinese students consider Macau and HK as a stepping stone to enhance their cultural capital, and

academic and linguistic skills, before joining overseas institutions in the US, the UK, Canada or Australia (Li & Bray, 2007).

Chinese students in HK often place higher values on social, cultural and economic factors than academic reputation. Cheung and Yue (2016) investigate the motivations of 130 Chinese students studying for education degrees in HK. Broadening of horizons through interacting with a lot of international students and foreigners have ranked as the most important reason ahead of the quality of higher education. As an international city and financial centre, HK has offered an English speaking learning and teaching environment, a taste of Western culture and a "East meet West" lifestyle which are lacking in China (Cheung & Yuen, 2016). Similarly, Chinese students have found HK as a desirable place to improve their linguistic, social, economic and cultural capitals because of the near 100 percent graduate employment rate and high salaries associated with the English language teaching profession and a better environment for development of transferrable and employment skills (Gao & Trent, 2009; M. Gu & Lai, 2012).

Correlations among social, academic, economic and cultural variables and academic reputation are evident in the above discussion but are not collectively controlled to identify a hierarchy of significant factors, except in Cheung *et al.* (2019) and To *et al.* (2014). Six significant factors identified by Cheung *et al.* (2019) are largely dissimilar to four factors acknowledged in To *et al.* (2014), apart from the importance of academic reputation and economic reasons such as employment, due to different survey questions used. While Cheung *et al.* (2019) concentrate on social, cultural, physical and economic reasons in both China and HK, To *et al.* (2014) measure a wide range of destination issues such as safety, cost of living, diverse student body, visa application procedures and personal and non-personal information

sources such as friends, family, education agent and university. Thus, some factors in Cheung *et al.* (2019) might not be generalised to other overseas destinations.

To *et al.* (2014) reveal the relevance of personal and non-personal information sources, which are not featured in Cheung *et al.* (2019), to decisions made by Chinese students. Different information sources, significant others such as parents, family, peers, teachers, alumni, higher education agents and the influences of online social media, have varied influences on study abroad destinations (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Cheung & Yuen, 2016; Knight, 2011; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; M. Yang, 2007). Around 52% of Chinese students choose Australia based on recommendations from family and relatives (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), while Chinese parents and students frequently use media advertisements, educational fairs and school career advisers to guide their decisions (Bodycott, 2009). In recent years, Chinese students have gained more power in the decision making process over their parents (Bodycott & Lai, 2012). Study abroad is often a collective decision, used by the wealthy upper class for immigration of the entire family or selected family members (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Xiang & Shen, 2009; M. Yang, 2007), similar to the strategy by HK families for Canadian immigration (Waters, 2006).

To sum up, the above overview reveals the key determinants of Chinese students' study abroad choices in the literature. Nearly all emphasise excellent academic reputation and its associations with favourable social, cultural and economic variables in host countries. The discussions expose the research gaps which inspire the current study. First, factor analysis is largely not used to establish the hierarchy of variable groups. Second, when significant factors are established, the relationship between individual characteristics, such as age, gender, academic ability, economic capital, etc., and factor scores is not examined. Third, the

survey participants are most likely to be from one overseas destination, leading to possible response bias. Finally, the decision making process is understood through pull and push variables. Push factors are negative forces so useful in understanding why Chinese students leave China, but unhelpful in explaining the choices of many overseas destinations. Thus, they will be minimised in the current study, similar to Ahmad and Hussain (2017).

This study

To address the literature gaps, this study used a survey to enable factor and regression analysis. To reduce response bias caused by a destination, Chinese students from all over the world were invited to participate in our survey between the second half of March 2017 and the end of May 2017, via the largest online survey provider in China, 问卷星, with over one hundred million daily visitors in 2020. To ensure that the survey was only filled in by prospective and study abroad Chinese students, the English version of the questionnaire was administrated due to the importance of English language in China and around the world (Marginson, 2008; Xiang & Shen, 2009; R. Yang & Welch, 2012) and English speaking overseas destinations chosen by the majority of Chinese students (OECD, 2017, 2018, 2019; UNESCO, 2019). The survey included seven individual differences, such as age, gender, degree level, previous travel or study abroad experience, family incomes and their current location (whether they were in China or abroad) and 51 questions taken from prior studies in order to guarantee internal reliability and validity.

Participants were asked to answer these questions using a 7-point Likert scale, following Ahmad & Hussain (2017), where 1 was equal to entirely disagree, and 7 entirely agree. The first 29 survey questions were germane to this research. Four academic reasons in both China and overseas destinations were generated from the Chinese student abroad literature (L-H. Chen, 2007; Cheung et al., 2019; Cheung & Xu, 2015; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) while 10

questions represented information sources ranging from significant ones to social media (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Knight, 2011; To et al., 2014; M. Yang, 2007) and the last 15 questions signified immigration, employment and business opportunities in both China and abroad and the image of the host country from student visa, living costs to cultural and social conditions (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Cheung, 2013 ; Cheung et al., 2019; Cheung & Xu, 2015; Cheung & Yuen, 2016; Cubillo et al., 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; To et al., 2014; M. Yang, 2007).

Insert Table 1

335 completed questionnaires were returned. 71% of the sample were prospective students who resided in China while 97 participants or 29% studied in countries such as the US, the UK, Australia, Austria, Canada, France, Greece, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Singapore, Spain and United Arab Emirates (UAE). 46.9% of participants were males and 53.1% females. 160 or 47.8% of participants were aged between 18 and 24, 86 or 25.7% between 25 and 30 and the remaining 89 over 30 years old. The sample was mainly comprised of postgraduate students (63%). The number of international travels and previous study abroad experiences of participants were collected due to their significant influences on generic skills such as independence, decision making, self-motivation, general knowledge, forward thinking, etc. (Scarinci & Pearce, 2012). Previous visits were found to have triggered family discussion of studying in Hong Kong (Bodycott & Lai, 2012). Thus, students were asked to provide information regarding previous travel and study abroad experiences.

27.2% of participants studied abroad prior to the survey. 30.5% never travelled abroad while the rest was divided into two groups, 35.8% having fewer than or equal to three overseas visits while 33.7% having four or more trips. The adoption of four times as a cut-off point was supported by Scarinci and Pearce (2012) who find that those who travelled abroad on

four or more occasions benefit most from skill development. The number of well-travelled students in our sample suggested sufficient financial resources which were consistent with self-reported family incomes. 90 participants did not disclose this information but the remaining 245 complied. 52 had less than £10,000 a year while 112, 51 and 30 respectively stated yearly earnings between £10,000 and £29,999, between £30,000 and £49,999 and at and above £50,000. 57.6% or 193 of participants were from families having a yearly income at least 2 times higher than the national average in 2016, 2017 and 2018, based on the per capita annual disposable income of less than 40,000 Chinese Yuan or £4,678 (£1= ¥8.55; September 2017) per urban household in China (EX, 2017; Xinhue, 2018, 2019).

Insert Table 2

Results

Factor analysis

Following Ahmad and Hussain (2017), factor analysis using principal components with varimax rotation was conducted to determine the primary elements of information sources used by, and influences of overseas destinations' characteristics, on Chinese students. Among 29 questions, only two questions in the section "Academic reasons" were reverse phrased to describe push factors in China. Reverse phrased items reduce response bias and do not affect factor analysis, however, if left untreated, can make a difference to reliability analysis such as Cronbach's α (Field, 2005). So, the Likert scores of questions 2 and 3, "difficult to gain entry to good universities at home" and "degree programmes are not available at home" on the 7-point scale were reversed back, in line with the rest of the questions, before statistical analyses by changing 1 to 7, 2 to 6, 3 to 5, 5 to 3, 6 to 2 and 7 to 1.

The data were analysed using IBM SPSS version 26. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin value was 0.80 and a significant Bartlett test of sphericity (< 0.000), which indicated good data

adequacy and a high degree of correlation among variables for factor analysis (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Field, 2005). Using the criteria eigenvalue > 1.00 and factor loading $> .60$ (Blunch, 2016; Field, 2005), eight factors were extracted, which accounted for 63.10% of total variance. The first three factors were kept after reliability tests using Cronbach's alpha. The alpha value should be 0.6 and above to signify the good and adequate consistency within each factor, especially in the case of factors with only two items (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017). The alpha values for the first three factors ranged from 0.78 to 0.74, well above 0.6, which account for 41.27% of variance. The five remaining factors were dropped when their alpha values failed to reach 0.6, the lowest cut-off point. Four out of five excluded factors had only two items and the remaining one contained five items.

The three significant factors are named social, cultural and economic (SCE), non-personal information (NPI) and personal information (PI). Our results in Table 3 suggest that the factor which has greatest influence on destination decisions of Chinese students is SCE, for example, making international contacts (social connections), living in a different culture (cross-culture understandings), opportunity of working after study in the host country and finding a job abroad (economic outcomes), which explains 19.19% of variance. NPI refers to non-personal information sources such as university website/prospectuses, academic reputation of the host country and social media/internet blogs, which are the second great influence, explaining 11.72% of variance. Chinese students gather knowledge of overseas destinations using mainly online information sources, one of which is fully controlled by universities and the other two can be strongly influenced by the host. The final and third factor explains 10.36% of variance, revealing a significant impact of recommendations from personal relations.

Insert Table 3

Regression results

To examine the impacts of individual differences such as age, gender, degree level, the number of foreign travels, the current location, previous study abroad experience and family incomes on three significant factors, multiple regression analysis was performed. The three factor scores were computed by SPSS and then used as dependent variables. Independent variables represented individual differences which were fully reported by 335 participants, except for family incomes. Thus, the regression analysis was initially carried out with the full sample size of 335 using individual differences, apart from family incomes. Then, family incomes were simultaneously controlled in regressions along with other independent variables with a reduced sample size from 335 to 245, excluding 90 participants without such information.

The independent variables were constructed as follows. Gender (male =1; female =0), age (18-24 =1; 25 and above =0), degree level (undergraduate =1; postgraduate =0), the current location (China =1, abroad =0) and previous study abroad experience (study abroad before =1, never =0) were binary independent variables. The number of foreign travels had three categories, never, 1-3 times and 4 or more times, so were dummy coded into two variables: countries travelled never (countries travelled never =1, others =0) and countries travelled 4 or more times (4 or more countries travelled =1, others =0). Likewise, a yearly family income had four levels, level 1 below £10,000, level 2 between £10,000 and £29,999, level 3 between £30,000 and £49,999, and level 4 at and above £50,000, so were dummy coded into three variables: income level 2 (between £10,000 and £29,999 =1; others =0), income level 3 (between £30,000 and £49,999 =1; others =0) and income level 4 (at and above £50,000 =1; others =0).

Insert Table 4

The determinants of the three significant factors of 335 participants were analysed and the results were shown in Table 4. All regressions were statistically significant and explained between 4, 5 and 9% of the variability of factors 1, 2 and 3, respectively. Gender was the only significant variable in explaining factors 1 and 2 at 1% and 5% levels, indicating statistical differences between males and females. Males on average scored significantly higher than females on SCE and NPI. In terms of factor 3, two variables, age and previous study abroad experience, were statistically significant at 1% levels, indicating the importance of PI on young participants aged between 18 and 24 and those who never studied abroad.

Insert Table 5

Table 5 reported the determinants of the three significant factors using 245 participants with family income information. Regressions for factors 1 and 3 explained 3% and 2% more of variance than those in Table 4. Gender and income level 4 both played a significant role in factor 1. Consistent with the regression results in Table 4, males put a higher value on SCE than females. However, participants from the highest income level group placed a much lower value on SCE than the rest of the participants from less well-off backgrounds. For factor 3 PI, young participants aged between 18 and 24, regardless of their family incomes, again scored higher than older participants but previous study abroad experience was no longer significant. Instead, participants with fewer than four previous international travels significantly appreciated PI. For factor 2 NPI, the gender influence disappeared after including income variables, which strongly suggested the interaction between gender and high income. Two interaction variables, 1 and 2, were created by multiplying gender by income levels 3 and 4. After controlling these two interaction variables, the regression on NPI became significant at a 5% level, explaining 4% of variation. Interestingly, male participants from the second highest income level group gave the lowest priority to NPI.

Discussion

Many studies have investigated the motivations of Chinese study abroad students (Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012; L-H. Chen, 2007; Cheung et al., 2019; Cheung & Xu, 2015; Cheung & Yuen, 2016; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; To et al., 2014; M. Yang, 2007). The most noteworthy factors are summarized as follows: academic reputation; social and cultural environment; financial and economic outcomes; and personal and non-personal information sources, which are duly incorporated in the survey questionnaire used by this research. Applying factor analysis to 335 completed questionnaires, it is found that the factor SCE, reflecting favourable social, cultural and economic outcomes in the host country, has the utmost influence on decisions while NPI, representing university controlled information, academic reputation of the host country and social media and internet blogs, occupies the second place and PI, recommendations from alumni, friends with previous study abroad experiences and teachers, the third place.

Our findings contradict some studies which rank SCE as the second or third influential factors behind academic reputation (L-H. Chen, 2007; Cheung et al., 2019; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; To et al., 2014; M. Yang, 2007), but share similarities with other research which places favourable social and cultural environment and economic outcomes of finding better-paid jobs in the host country as well as abroad as the key reason for studying, living and working abroad (Cheung & Xu, 2015; Cheung & Yuen, 2016; Gao & Trent, 2009; M. Gu & Lai, 2012), consistent with brain drain reported in the literature (Chang & Deng, 1992; X. Hao, Yan, Guo, & Wang, 2017; Picke & Xiang, 2009; Poston & Luo, 2007; Zweig, 2006). Brain drain is noticeable among Chinese scholars with doctoral degrees from prestigious American research institutions as 85% of them who gained their doctorate in 2006 still remained in the US in 2011 (Economist, 2014).

The unique and principal contributions of the current study to the international student choice literature are to identify the strong and significant correlations between gender, family income and SCE between gender, family income and NPI and between age, prior study or travel abroad experiences and PI after regressing three significant factors on multiple independent variables such as age, gender, degree level, previous travelling experience, previous study abroad experience, family income and the current location. In traditional Chinese society, boys and girls are given distinctive social and cultural roles such as bread winner or home maker so boys, when grown up, are expected to financially provide for the family. Nowadays, it is still common in China that men can only secure marriages if they can afford apartments and cars (Lim, 2013).

The results depicted here powerfully suggest the continuity of traditional social and cultural practices by gender in China, mediated by the socioeconomic status of men. Although men evidently use NPI to choose overseas destinations which can significantly enhance their social, cultural and economic capitals (SCE), those from the highest or the second highest family income groups respectively discount both factors. Only Chinese men from the lowest income group knowingly and actively rely on study abroad destinations to improve their social and economic status. The complex relations between gender, family income and study abroad destination choices are first demonstrated in this study and provide strong statistical support for prior studies which conjecture the links between social and economic outcomes abroad and individual circumstances (Cheung & Xu, 2015; Cheung & Yuen, 2016; Dimmock & Leong, 2010; Gao & Trent, 2009; Q. Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Lee, 2017; Li & Bray, 2007; To et al., 2014).

At first glance, it is surprising to see the secondary importance of academic reputation (NPI) after SCE. Economic outcomes of employment around the world are positively related to academic reputation (Ashley & Empson, 2017; Cook, Faulconbridge, & Muzio, 2012; J. Hao & Welch, 2012; J. Hao, Wen, & Welch, 2016; A.L. Rivera, 2011; A. L. Rivera, 2012; Tholen, Brown, Power, & Allouch, 2013; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Academic reputation is probably demoted by students at the top end of social and economic spectra in China, called "economic elites" (Q. Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Economic and social elites go hand in hand in China (Xiang & Shen, 2009), so relatively poor quality overseas education is unable to reduce the chance of the children of elites of maintaining their upper class status in China. Students from the richest families in the current study are indifferent to social, cultural and economic opportunities abroad, but low and middle class Chinese students see overseas education in Hong Kong and Macau as an important ladder for social and economic climbing (Li & Bray, 2007).

The least significant factor determining destination choices of Chinese students is personal information sources (PI) from alumni, friends, teachers or professors. The preference for personal sources is varied by age and previous overseas experiences. Significant others such as parents or relatives are not presented in PI, which appears to contradict the traditional and contemporary Confucian Chinese culture of a high level of parental interference. Previous studies confirm that the parental interference levels are 65% and 52% (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Both percentages are much lower than the 80% reported among Indonesian students, and 67% among Taiwanese students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

It is possible that most of Chinese parents in the early 2000s had very little knowledge of overseas education, hence a low parental interference level. The difference noted by this

study might be instigated by liberal and well-travelled parents. For students who are aged between 18 and 24, their parents were probably born between the middle of the 1960s and the early part of the 1970s. Based on family incomes, those parents, compared with previous generations of Chinese parents, have benefited from the rapid economic growth since the 1980s so are likely to have exposure to Western culture and live in big cities. Chinese parents who come from the wealthier cities and/or have prior study abroad experiences are found to be more open to their child's study abroad choices (Bodycott & Lai, 2012). Additionally, parents probably have trust and confidence in personal relations from whom students obtain destination information.

In recent years, English speaking, fee paying and foreign run private schools have mushroomed in China. Those schools act as a study abroad information centre for young prospective students who can utilise the knowledge of alumni, friends who studied abroad before and teachers. Some Chinese students mention gathering information from their teachers in a Canadian high school in Dalian, China (L-H. Chen, 2008). Interpersonal sources are not used by Chinese students who had study abroad experiences or travelled four or more times abroad before and after controlling family income. There is a strong correlation between prior study abroad experience and high family incomes, while travelling abroad is prevalent across all income groups, probably because it costs far less than study abroad. Travelling abroad enables first-hand experience of a destination so as to inform decision making (Bodycott & Lai, 2012) while study and travel abroad indicates better English communication skills, which can facilitate information gathering without relying on personal sources. Students with previous study or travel abroad experiences are likely to be more independent and confident in decision making.

Conclusions

The most important finding by this study is that Chinese male students from low social and economic classes actively improve their status using overseas education after controlling age, overseas travel and learning experiences and educational level. Social distancing, travel restrictions, online teaching delivery and economic downturns as a result of the pandemic in countries such as the US (CDC, 2020), the UK (DfT, 2020) and Australia (DoH, 2020) would adversely affect the SCE outcomes of this particular group of Chinese students. Admittedly, this study is based on the survey conducted in 2017 but the importance of SEC has been reported in previous studies investigating overseas Chinese students and their employment destinations since the 1970s (Cheung & Xu, 2015; Cheung & Yuen, 2016; Economist, 2014; Gao & Trent, 2009; M. Gu & Lai, 2012; Pieke & Xiang, 2009; Zweig, 2006).

Prior to the Covid-19 period, Chinese male students with limited economic resources are most likely to be found in destinations which can provide scholarships if they are academically brilliant and/or offer lower living costs and tuition fees than the US, the UK or Australia (Cheung & Xu, 2015; Dimmock & Leong, 2010; Lee, 2017; Li & Bray, 2007; To et al., 2014). As Covid-19 has already constrained social and cultural exchange between Chinese students and natives and has limited job opportunities, the appeal of overseas education in the US, the UK or Australia to this particular student group could decrease. On the other hand, Covid-19 should have very little impact on the number of Chinese study abroad students as the 79% majority in our sample is from families with above average incomes, which make them less sensitive to the undesirable social, cultural and economic environment abroad. Thus, the long-term effect of Covid-19 on the number of Chinese study abroad students and the financial stability of institutions in English speaking countries should be longitudinally examined in future research.

Covid-19 undoubtedly stimulates promotion, branding and marketing by destinations which are the key to maintain the number of Chinese students. The current study provides more refined guidance on how to promote institutions than prior research which has yet to statistically analyse the link between individual differences and significant study abroad factors. Our results suggest that institutions should make sure that their website is appealing, easy to navigate and well-designed while websites and prospectuses should be used to highlight institutional strengths and values in a way that differentiates them from competitors and which endorses esteem and admiration (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017) from prospective Chinese male students from low socioeconomic status families. Collectively, institutions in a country should work together to improve the overall image as a high quality educational hub so as to attract Chinese students whose decisions are guided by academic reputation. English speaking countries currently have an advantage over other countries as their institutions dominate global university rankings and English is instrumental in global knowledge development, research and exchange (Kim, 2011; Marginson, 2008; QS, 2020; Waters, 2006; Xiang & Shen, 2009; R. Yang & Welch, 2012).

Destinations can enhance their appeal to Chinese students by building positive and constructive relations with social media companies, bloggers, current and past Chinese students, teachers and professors in schools and colleges in China. The extensive internet usage among Chinese students is related to their formative upbringings during the period when many digital technologies such as the Internet, e-mail, mobile phones, iPhones, and social media have become available in China (Jia & Winseck, 2018). In June 2019, China recorded the world's largest internet population with 854 million users, a penetration rate of 61.2% of the country's population (CNNIC, 2019). The internet obsession has been further

fuelled by Covid-19, which has stimulated more online messaging services and social media activities in China (Watson, 2020).

As travel has been greatly curtailed because of Covid-19, students will rely more on social media, chatrooms and the online Chinese overseas community when making study abroad decisions. Online searches are especially pertinent to Chinese students with previous study or travel abroad experiences as they positively avoid using personal recommendations.

Extensive internet research into products, prices, and the operators' track records is similarly observed among well-travelled and study abroad Chinese students in Australia before participating in adventure tourism (Gardiner & Kwek, 2017).

To attract young prospective students, destinations should improve overall student satisfaction and target alumni and teachers in schools and colleges through continuous marketing and brand management (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017). Current Chinese students who have good personal experiences in the destination can disseminate praise and recommendations via online blogs and chatrooms to students in China as personal comments regarding overseas destinations by current students, alumni, teachers and professors can make or break a deal for young Chinese students aged between 18 and 24.

This study is a preliminary attempt to understand the intricate relations between important study abroad factors and personal differences such as age, gender, socio-economic status, overseas experiences and educational level among Chinese students. The findings suggest that varied and differentiated marketing, branding and promotion techniques based on individual differences should be adopted by overseas destinations in their pursuit of Chinese fee-paying self-financing students. The results concur with those of previous studies in that to

attract international students, institutions need to advertise, market and brand themselves based on not only different nationalities and regions, but also individual characteristics (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Finally, the current study has its limitations as it relies on a relatively small sample, given over 860,000 Chinese students studying abroad in 2017 (OECD, 2019). The results of this paper might not be generalizable to all Chinese students currently planning to study abroad or studying in overseas institutions now. One individual variable, academic ability, is not collected and examined in this research due to the fear of possible self-reported bias (Ang et al., 2007; John & Robins, 1994; Sitzmann, Ely, Brown, & Bauer, 2010). Future research could be carried out to incorporate academic ability provided by independent sources such as schools or colleges into destination decisions. That said, factors stated here are mutually reported by previous studies (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017; Cheung et al., 2019; To et al., 2014).

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Table 1. Study abroad survey questions

<i>Academic reasons</i>	
Q1	Overseas courses are better than local ones
Q2	Difficult to gain entry to good universities at home
Q3	Degree programmes are not available at home
Q4	Willing to recognise my previous qualifications
Q5	Time to obtain a degree (quicker than China)
<i>Information sources</i>	
Q6	Family-parents and relatives
Q7	Friends who studied abroad before
Q8	Current or past students
Q9	Current or past teachers/university lecturers
Q10	Higher education agents
Q11	Education fairs and adverts on papers and magazines
<i>Alternative information sources</i>	
Q12	University website/prospectuses
Q13	University open days
Q14	Social media/internet blogs
Q15	University league tables
<i>What do you wish to achieve through and after study abroad</i>	
Q16	Enhance career prospects in China
Q17	Intention of migration
Q18	Live in a different culture
Q19	Find a job abroad due to more money and high social status
Q20	Make international contacts
Q21	Make contacts with Chinese students whose parents are powerful
<i>Host country image</i>	
Q22	Student visa application procedures
Q23	Living costs
Q24	Opportunity of working during study
Q25	Opportunity of working after study
Q26	Academic reputation
Q27	Social and cultural life
Q28	Geographic closeness to home country
Q29	Cultural and linguistic distance

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of sample students based on gender, age, degree level, previous travel experience, family income, current location and prior study abroad experience

Gender	No.	Percent
Male	157	46.9%
Female	178	53.1%
Age		
18-24	160	47.8%
25 and over	175	52.2%
Degree level		
Undergraduates	124	37.0%
Postgraduates	211	63.0%
Travel abroad experience		
Zero	102	30.5%
1 to 3	120	35.8%
4 and more	113	33.7%
Family income		
No info	90	26.9%
Below £10,000	52	15.5%
Between 10,000 to 29,999	112	33.4%
Between 30,000 to 49,999	51	15.2%
At and above 50,000	30	9.0%
Current location		
China	238	71.0%
Abroad	97	29.0%
Study abroad experience		
Yes	91	27.2%
No	244	72.8%
Total	335	100.0%

Table 3. Factor loadings for information and influences on destination decisions made by Chinese students

	SCE	NPI	PI
Social, cultural and economic reasons			
Q20 Make international contacts	0.812		
Q18 Live in a different culture	0.777		
Q25 Opportunity of working after study in the host country	0.664		
Q19 Find a job abroad due to more money and high social status	0.625		
Non personal info			
Q12 University website/prospectuses		0.763	
Q26 Academic reputation of the host country		0.696	
Q14 Social media/internet blogs		0.688	
Personal info			
Q8 Current or past students			0.809
Q7 Friends who studied abroad before			0.799
Q9 Current or past teachers/university lecturers			0.670
Eigenvalue	5.57	3.40	3.00
Variance (%)	19.19	11.72	10.36
Cumulative variance (%)	19.19	30.91	41.27
Cronbach's alpha	0.78	0.74	0.74

Abbreviations: SCE, social, cultural and economic reasons; NPI, non-personal information sources; and PI, personal information sources.

Table 4. Regression analyses of factor scores for all 335 participants

	Factor Scores		
	F1	F2	F3
Constant	-0.23	-0.36	0.19
Sig (p-value)	0.15	0.02**	0.20
Gender (Male=1; female=0)	0.36	0.24	-0.19
Sig (p-value)	0.00***	0.03**	0.09
Age (18-24=1; over 25=0)	-0.12	-0.13	0.41
Sig (p-value)	0.29	0.26	0.00***
Degree level (Undergraduate=1; Postgraduate=0)	-0.07	0.20	0.03
Sig (p-value)	0.56	0.08	0.80
Countries travelled Never=1; others=0	-0.04	0.22	-0.19
Sig (p-value)	0.78	0.12	0.17
Countries travelled 4 or more=1; others=0	0.03	-0.01	-0.21
Sig (p-value)	0.83	0.94	0.09
Current location (China=1; overseas=0)	0.22	0.18	-0.13
Sig (p-value)	0.10	0.18	0.31
Study abroad (Yes=1; No=0)	-0.06	0.15	-0.33
Sig (p-value)	0.66	0.24	0.01***
Adjusted R square	0.04	0.05	0.09
F	2.70	3.47	5.88
Sig.	0.01***	0.00***	0.00***
No of cases	335	335	335

Notes: dependent variables are factor scores. F1 represents SCE, social, cultural and economic reasons; F2 embodies NPI, non-personal information sources; and F3 denotes PI, personal information sources.

*** and ** Significant at 1% and 5% levels, respectively.

Table 5. Regression analyses of factor scores for all 245 participants with family income information

	Factor Scores			
	F1	F2	F3	F2
Constant	0.00	-0.10	0.11	-0.17
Sig (p-value)	0.99	0.63	0.56	0.44
Gender (Male=1; female=0)	0.40	0.16	-0.16	0.31
Sig (p-value)	0.00***	0.25	0.17	0.06
Age (18-24=1; over 25=0)	-0.17	-0.23	0.34	-0.22
Sig (p-value)	0.22	0.12	0.01***	0.13
Degree level (Undergraduate=1; Postgraduate=0)	-0.04	0.27	0.09	0.23
Sig (p-value)	0.79	0.06	0.46	0.10
Countries travelled Never=1; others=0	-0.02	0.16	-0.25	0.18
Sig (p-value)	0.90	0.34	0.10	0.30
Countries travelled 4 or more=1; others=0	0.02	0.03	-0.28	0.01
Sig (p-value)	0.88	0.85	0.04**	0.94
Current location (China=1; overseas=0)	0.20	0.13	-0.18	0.14
Sig (p-value)	0.21	0.42	0.22	0.41
Study abroad experience (Yes=1; No=0)	0.05	0.16	-0.19	0.15
Sig (p-value)	0.72	0.30	0.16	0.32
Income level 2 (between £10,000 and £29,999 =1; others =0)	-0.18	-0.25	0.18	-0.25
Sig (p-value)	0.27	0.15	0.23	0.14
Income level 3 (between £30,000 and £49,999 =1; others =0)	-0.25	-0.20	-0.22	0.15
Sig (p-value)	0.21	0.32	0.21	0.58
Income level 4 (at and above £50,000 =1; others =0)	-0.55	-0.07	0.31	0.00
Sig (p-value)	0.02**	0.77	0.14	1.00

Interaction variable 1 (Male X income level 3)	<i>n.s</i>	<i>n.s</i>	<i>n.s</i>	-0.65
Sig (p-value)				0.05**
Interaction variable2 (Male X income level 4)	<i>n.s</i>	<i>n.s</i>	<i>n.s</i>	-0.10
Sig (p-value)				0.81
Adjusted R square	0.07	0.03	0.11	0.04
F	2.71	1.71	4.02	1.78
Sig.	0.00***	0.08	0.00***	0.05**
No of cases	245	245	245	245

Notes: dependent variables are factor scores. F1 represents SCE, social, cultural and economic reasons; F2 embodies NPI, non-personal information sources; and F3 denotes PI, personal information sources.

*** and ** Significant at 1% and 5% levels, respectively.